Decision Memorandum on Action and for Application of:

Mineral Hill Hazardous Fuels Reduction,
Categorical Exclusion #OR134-08-CX-029
U.S. Department of the Interior - Bureau of Land Management
Spokane District, Wenatchee Field Office

Categorical Exclusion 1.12

Description of the Proposed Action and the Purpose and Need for the Action

Mineral Hill Fuels Reduction Project

The Bureau of Land Management Spokane District is proposing to reduce fuels on approximately 800 acres in T. 36 N, R. 24 E., Section 35 and T. 35 N., R. 24 E., Section 2 in Okanogan County, Washington (please see enclosed project map). The purpose of the project is to lessen the risk of wildfire spreading onto private lands and into the nearby community of Conconully, Washington. Reducing the fuels hazard will also increase forest health and improve resiliency to disease.

"The Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA), National Fire Plan (USDA ISDI 2001), and the 10 Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan (USDA USDI 2002) highlight the need for fuel reduction in Western forests" (Peterson et al. 2004).

There is a documented flammable fuel condition in the ponderosa pine and Douglas fir stands in the area as indicated by the 2004 Fisher fire and the 2006 Fires of North Central Washington, which were major wildfires in these fuel types a few years ago. The fuels consist of dense crowded, small and medium diameter conifers with some mistletoe brooms, and patches of dense brush. This existing fuel load and the difficult access for firefighters puts the BLM property and homes in the Mineral Hill area at a high degree of risk from wildfire. The incised drainage topography and highly flammable fuels present risks for a wind-driven wildfire that would be fast moving and difficult to contain.

Hazardous fuel reduction is needed to:

(1) Restore ponderosa pine, ponderosa pine/Douglas fir, and aspen stands to a more open and healthy condition more capable of surviving a wildland fire. "Lower density stands likely had higher general vigor and lesser affects from insects (Fule et al. 1997, Kalabokidis et al. 2002) The project area was identified as Fire Regime I, Condition Class III.

(2) Reduce fireline intensity and spread by the reduction of ground, ladder and canopy fuels. "The tree canopy is the primary stratum involved in crown fires, and the spatial continuity and density of tree canopies combine with fuel moisture and wind to determine rate of fire spread and severity (Rothermel 1983). The shrub/small tree stratum is also involved in crown fires by increasing surface fireline intensity and serving as "ladder fuel" that provides continuity from the surface fuel to canopy fuel, thereby potentially facilitating active crown fires."

(3) Reduce the risk of wildland fires.

"In forest stands that have not experienced fire or thinning for several decades, heavy thinning combined with (often multiple) prescribed fire or surface fuel treatments, or both, is necessary to effectively reduce potential fire behavior and crown-fire hazard"(Peterson et. al. 2004)

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to reduce the density of small- and medium-size trees and to reduce the density of stands of brush. The net effect of these treatments would be to reduce the fuel load in the understory, break up the fuel ladder into tree canopies, and break up the continuity of brush stands, and rejuvenate aspen stands. Rejuvenating aspen stands would lessen the flammability of the area since aspen is less prone to burn than either conifer trees or brush. Treated areas would be more resistant to drought, diseases and insect attacks with a reduced potential for stand replacement fires and wild fire threats to adjacent lands.

Due in part to the steepness of the area, the primary means of fuels reduction will be hand thinning of the Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir understory (trees < 6" dbh) and piling for later burning. A minor amount of overstory removal will take place in areas <40% slope, where tractor skidders would be used to remove the timber. On slopes over 40% trees would be removed using a cable yarding system. Temporary roads, landings and skid trails would be built where needed and closed when the project is complete. Where possible, existing roads, landings, and skid trails would be used.

Trees would be manually thinned, and brush reduced on 800 acres beginning in the summer of 2008 or spring and summer of 2009. Slash (tree and shrub trimmings) and cuttings would be hand piled, machine piled, or lopped and scattered across the units. Merchantable material would be removed which could include logs, firewood, posts and poles and biomass. Tree stems that are cut and not removed would be cut into pieces no longer than 4 feet in length. Piles would be burned at a time of the year when conditions would not allow spread of fire. Broadcast burning would be done in areas to reduce fuel loading to five tons per acre or less. Periodic burning at 10 year intervals may be needed to maintain a safe fuel loading. Some aspen clones would be vulnerable to damage from cattle grazing. To prevent grazing damage, several aspen clones would be fenced until the aspen sprouts reach a height of between five and seven feet. Fencing would consist of two strand barbed wire using tree stems as fence posts where feasible. Fencing would include an area up to one hundred feet around the clone to encourage clone expansion. Some clones would be treated by using equipment with a ripping tooth to cut areas around the clones to a depth of approximately one foot to sever roots from the parent tree and encourage root sprouting. Mechanical treatment of brush including the chipping of ground vegetation under aspen clones would reduce the fire hazard and encourage aspen sprouting.

Skidtrails, landings, and other areas of soil disturbance would be reseeded with native grasses and forbs. Reopened roads would be closed, and new roads (approximately two hundred feet) would be obliterated upon project completion.

Noxious weeds will be monitored for at least 2 years within the treatment unit, and all noxious weed sightings will be reported to the Spokane District, Noxious Weed Program

Ground disturbance would be avoided at identified Cultural sites. In the event any new cultural sites are discovered, work would stop in the area, and the Cultural Program contacted.

Plan Conformance

This proposed action is subject to the Spokane District Resource Management Plan Record of Decision (RMP/ROD)(1987), and the RMP Amendment ROD (1992). The proposed action has been reviewed and found to be in conformance with this plan (43 CFR 1610.5, BLM MS 1617.3).

Compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act

The Proposed Action is categorically excluded from further documentation under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with 516 DM 2, Appendix 1, 1.12. The application of this categorical exclusion is appropriate in this situation, because there are no extraordinary circumstances (per 516 DM 2, Appendix 2) potentially having effects that may significantly affect the environment. None of the extraordinary circumstances listed on the following checklist apply to this project.

Compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act

The project area was inventoried in 1993 for cultural resources (Class III level) for the Mineral Hill Timber Sale. Because of this, no additional inventory is required, although there are 8 sites in the project area that require protective buffers. The sites will be monitored by a BLM archaeologist prior to project implementation. Consultation was initiated with Colville Confederated Tribes and the Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation for this project on 3/20/2008. The project will require completion of the Section 106 consultation prior to implementation.

CX Review		
Yes	No	Extraordinary Circumstance
	X	2.1 - Have significant impacts on public health or safety.
	X	2.2 - Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation, or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (Executive Order 11990); floodplains (Executive Order 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas.
	X	2.3 - Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [NEPA Section 102 (2)(E)].
	X	2.4 -Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks.
	X	2.5 - Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principal about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects.
	X	2.6 – Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant, but significant cumulative environmental effects.

CX Review		
Yes	No	Extraordinary Circumstance
	X	2.7 - Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by either the Bureau of office.
	X	2.8 – Have significant impacts on species listed, or proposed to be listed, on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have significant impacts on designated Critical Habitat for these species.
	X	2.9 – Violate a Federal law; or a State, local, or tribal law or requirement; imposed for the protection of the environment.
	X	2.10 – Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations (Executive Order 12898).
	X	2.11 – Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical integrity of such sacred sites (Executive Order 13007).
	X	2.12 – Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species (Federal Noxious Weed Control Act and Executive Order 13112).

Persons and Agencies Consulted

The project has been coordinated with the following:

- Local landowners
- United States Forest Service
- Washington Department of Natural Resources
- Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

Consultation was initiated for the Mineral Hill Fuels Reduction Project on March 20, 2008 with the State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, and the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation on March 20, 2008.

Decision and Rationale on Action

It is my decision to implement the Mineral Hill Fuels project as described above and shown on attached maps. These actions meet the need for action. In addition, I have reviewed the plan conformance statement and have determined that the proposed action is in conformance with the approved land use plan and that no further environmental analysis is required.

I also considered pertinent information submitted by all persons who commented either verbally or in writing during the design of project activities. There are no known adverse impacts to the human or natural environment that would occur from implementing this project.

Implementation Date

This project will be implemented on or after May 1, 2008.

_____/S/_____ ___3/21/08_

Donald Washco Date
Field Manager, Wenatchee Resource Area

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

Any party that is adversely affected and determined to be a party to the case, may appeal the implementation of the proposed action to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of the Secretary, in accordance with the regulations contained in 43 CFR Part 4. A notice of appeal must be filed in this office (at the address below) within 30 days of receipt of this decision. The appellant has the burden of showing that the decision is in error.

An appellant may also file a petition for a stay (suspension) of this decision during the time that the appeal is being reviewed by the Board pursuant to Part 4, Subpart B, 43 CFR Part 4.21. The petition for a stay must accompany the notice of appeal. A petition for a stay is required to show sufficient justification based on the standards listed below. Copies of the notice of appeal and petition for a stay must be submitted to each party named in this decision, to the Interior Board of Land Appeals, and the Office of the Solicitor (see 43 CFR 4.413) at the same time the original documents are filed with this office. The appellant has the burden of proof of demonstrating that a stay should be granted.

Standards for Obtaining a Stay

Except as otherwise provided by law or other pertinent regulation, a petition for a stay of decision pending appeal shall show sufficient justification based on the following standards:
(a) The relative harm to the parties if the stay is granted or denied,
(b) The likelihood of the appellant's success on the merits,
(c) The likelihood of immediate and irreparable harm if the stay is not granted, and
(d) Whether the public interest favors granting the stay.

Contact Person

For additional information concerning this decision, contact:

- Mark Williams, Forester, Mark_Williams@blm.gov
- Wenatchee Field Office, 915 Walla Walla Ave, Wenatchee, WA 98801
- Phone: (509) 665-2133. Fax (509) 665-2121

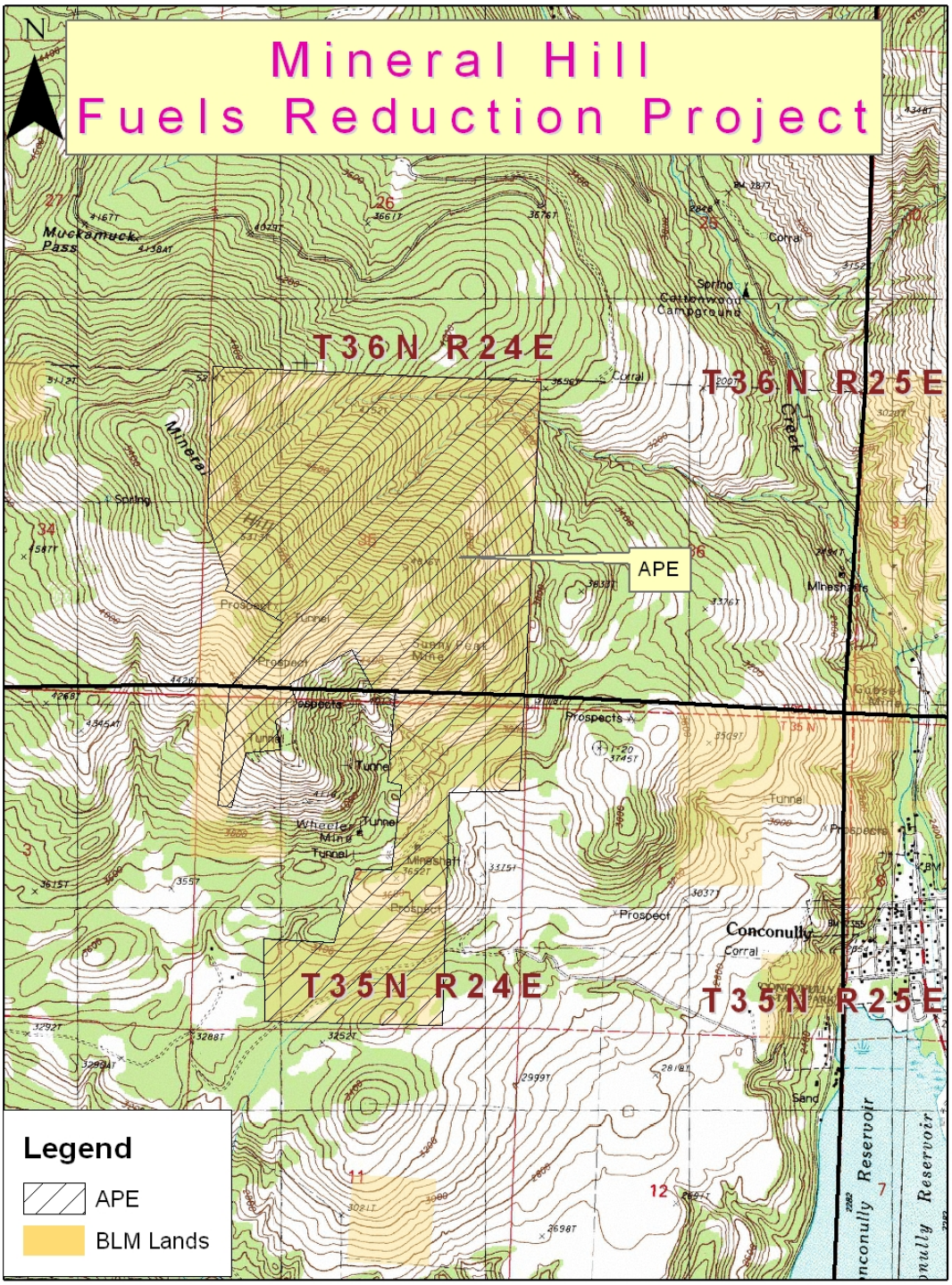
References Cited:

Fule, P.Z., Covington, W.W., Moore, M.M. 1997. Determining reference conditions for ecosystem management of Southwestern ponderosa pine forest. Ecological Applications. 7:895-908.

Kalabokidis, K.D., Gatzojannis, S., Galatsidas, S. 2002. Introducing wildfire into forest management planning: towards a conceptual approach. Forest Ecology and Management. 158:41-50.

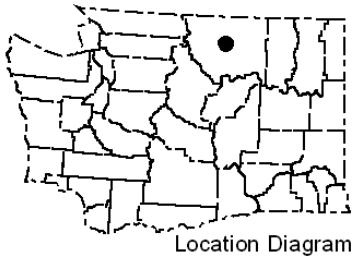
Peterson, David L., Johnson, Morris C., Agee, James K., Jain, Teresa B., McKenzie, Donald, Reinhardt, Elizabeth D. 2004. Fuel Planning: science synthesis and integration-forest structure and fire hazard. Gen. Tech. Rep. PNW-GTR-XXX. Portland Oregon, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station.

Rothermel, R.C. 1983. How to predict the spread and intensity of forest and range fires. Res. Pap. INT-143. Ogden UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station. 161 p.



USDI Bureau of Land Management
Spokane District
1103 N. Fancher
Spokane, WA 99212
(509) 536-1200

Okanogan County, Washington



Location Diagram